

Can You Hear The Drums, Ferrando?

Now that the introductions are complete and we're into the story, the show makes its mandate clear: to transcend the source material. It comes mighty close this week, with strong and subtle thematic work, and a deft cinematic touch that more than equals anything that we saw on The Wire -- and that's not a comparison I would make lightly. Not because I love the show so much, which I do, but because the people that love it the most are insane, and will cut you.

Captain America runs around with a stolen AK, shooting at enemies only he can see and getting officious and pissy with anybody who doesn't indulge his paranoid drama-queen bullshit, which is everybody; Encino Man is now officially so retarded that he's become totally awesome; Sixta fellates the Grooming Standard some more, and Godfather, with that shit-sucking face of his; Godfather continues to beguile and bemuse with his "equal parts stupid and cool" thing he's got going on; Person becomes completely charming and not irritating in the slightest, then has sex with a tank; Walt almost gets his adorable head cut off; Rudy is slightly less gay for a second, then refers to his uniform as his "super hero costume," more than doubling down on his total gayness quotient; Evan has a three-way with Ray and the prenominate tank; Iceman tells the saddest story of the whole book, which is totally touching and rough, and perfects the patented "Brad Colbert Is Helpless & Hurting" look; Doc Bryan runs around being pissed a whole lot, so that's new; Espera hates the white man some more; war results in dead bodies, as it turns out; Trombley finally kills somebody, which is like his birthday and Christmas all at once; and Brad almost tells Encino Man to eat a dick, but then doesn't, because Nate Fick's puppydog Opie Eyes are the most powerful force of all.

The ROE changes again: now if they're carrying weapons, you're cleared hot. Bravo heads north, toward Nasiriyah, and crosses through the city in broad daylight. At this time Captain American subdues an unarmed, unmanned minivan with about fifty billion AK rounds while pissing and moaning into the radio and ignoring requests to explain WTF his deal is. Encino Man tells Bravo to take a wrong turn, which Brad and Nate know is a wrong turn, and then blames them for taking a wrong turn when they end up miles away from the rest of the company. This hurts Nate slightly less than being out of the action hurts Trombley, who gets some soon enough after Godfather scraps a plan to go around Al Gharraf and sends them straight into a seriously intense firefight through the city.

Bravo Company joins a crazy long traffic jam headed north, joining up with the rest of the First Marine Division on "Saddam's highways," per Iceman. Trombley bitches because they spent the first 48 hours of the war on point, and now they're in the rear-to-middle of a traffic jam. Because why the fuck would a *reconnaissance* battalion be anywhere near the front? Iceman laughs and tells Trombley not to "question the strategic plan."

Once they join the column, Person goes off on a rant that is near and dear to my heart, staring around at the other units' trucks and the stupid shit they have spray-painted all over it. "Angry American. Get Some? *Don't Tread On Me?* Let's Roll? Fuck, man, I hate that fucking cheesy moto bullshit... It's like that song, 'When stars and stripes and eagles fly?' Fuck, man, eagles fly in Canada too. When we got back from Afghanistan my mom tried to play me that song and I was all, 'Fuck no, Mom, I'm a Marine. I don't need to fly a little fucking patriotic flag on my car to show that I'm patriotic.' Seriously. That's so ridiculous. Brad agrees, but in a way that

conflates two very funny Iceman things into one less-funny, kinda-stupid Iceman things that never actually happened: "That song is straight homosexual country-music Special Olympic gay." Which -- while bringing to mind the highest achievement in televisual dialogue in the history of America ("I don't mean gay as in *homosexual*, I mean gay as in *retarded*") -- would have been funnier if they'd just left it alone: Iceman has a huge problem with country music, like country and western, and accurately calls it "the Special Olympics of music." Folding that into some generic gay joke cheapens them both, frankly. What I'm saying is that both the joke at the expense of homosexuals and the joke at the expense of the mentally disadvantaged deserve better.

40 km outside Nasiriyah, the Marines start noticing that Josh Ray Person is kinda tasty, and that the Iraqis are noticing it too, which they think is hilarious. Ray says not a word about this, just turns it into hate toward women or whatever and complains about how they're in the back with "the fucking chicks, the supply trucks and the hajji truckers," and he's super sad because they had been training for last week's scrapped bridge mission for "six fuckin' weeks" before it disappeared for no real reason. Garza agrees, from the turret up top, and says he'll be mad if the war ends before he gets some.

"Drop down here, my little brown friend," says Brad, and Gabe jumps down into the truck. "Missions are always getting fragged. We're Marines. We obey our orders. Our mission now is not to do our original mission." That's... sort of satisfying, I guess, in the usual counterintuitive military way, to think of it that way. The whole voluntary way that you just decide to go along with the idea that yellow is green because they say so, until green is suddenly red, and you have to have the class not to even like remember that it used to be yellow... It's a pretty big theme throughout the episode, and the book.

It's difficult to get your fingers around it, though, because while the chain of command rests on the idea that you follow orders unquestioningly, the whole thing rests on its own little idea that officership is manifest destiny/divine right of kings and that nobody would be promoted or become an officer that doesn't deserve it in the first place, and that's the part that's falling down. So every second is a mutiny and the refutation of that mutiny, because you're holding yourself and everybody around you up against an impossible standard, and striving to reach it. Which is nice -- and it's exactly the reason I love Nate Fick so much, because he understands the tension in that moment, and is able to put his feelings about honor and patriotism and that stuff into words so beautifully -- except by that same token you're constantly failing to reach it, which isn't depressing unless it's your superior officer doing the fucking up, and then it's like all I would be able to think about. My CO is God/my CO is an idiot. "Semper Gumby," says Garza, climbing back out, "Always flexible."

Later, Brad decides to take a shit. Which is bad news, because something horrible always happens when Brad decides to take a shit. Immediately after he takes off for

what Ray calls his "first combat dump in country," Nate radios in for him so they can discuss the total non-win that is Nasiriyah.

Ray is distracted, however, by the equally maddening and kind of adorably clueless sight of fucking idiotic Captain America goose-stepping past -- literally humming the Marine Hymn (that's the one about Montezuma and Tripoli) -- with a shiny AK in his hands. He looks so ridiculous and unreal all the time, I love it. Ray praises his AK, and Captain America proudly explains that he got it from an enemy cache: "Well-oiled, pretty clean. Not bad for a third-world army." He very officially hands the gun over to some Corporal and lectures the guy about how you have to be prepared and blah blah and the guy kisses his ass for a second -- "That's why you're in charge, sir!" -- and then spits like Sophia Petrillo after his retreat, like this wet, giant loogie, onto the ground, and then complains to the black mustache guy that was telling the ass-licking story last week: "To think I believed the judge when he told me the Marine Corps was a superior alternative to jail. I should have shut up and done my time." The guy just sighs. Captain America makes everybody so, so tired.

I don't know. When I was a kid, like in elementary school, I didn't love anything as much as the boys that drew tanks and guns in the margins of their school papers, because at least they fucking got it. I lived and still live in mortal fear of injuring myself, so I couldn't play with them outside because they liked to play way rough; but inside, we made it work somehow or another, and I watched those kids getting older and weirder all through junior high and high school, and some of them turned all Columbine and some of them turned normal and some of them are officers now, and a lot of them turned out like these guys. I don't know what it is that bridged that gap, except for I think probably there's a specificity to the desire to help everybody at once that's maybe somehow genetically linked to the need for the kind of order and authority that the military represents. Or maybe not genetically, maybe it's a life thing too, but we don't need to go into my business at this time, like, suffice to say the need to get control of your surroundings, if those surroundings are particularly uncontrolled, can push you from being a potential one of these kids to being entirely one of these kids.

Or to put it another way, Holden Caulfield and GI Joe are basically two iterations of the same guy: somebody naïve, trying to reconcile his basically limitless idealism to his intimate relationship with futility. He wants to help everybody in the world at once, because he's good/he knows everybody in the world is fucked, because the world is not good. So as horrible and stupid as Captain America is in the real literal world, he's still kind of on my team, because he is so that little kid playing dress-up that he's *literally still playing dress-up*. He's drawing AKs and tanks in the corners of his life. Which is sad, because check it: *You Are Here*.

Sixta's still screaming about the grooming standard to set up some stuff later in the episode, and Q-Tip says "Screwby" like a billion times because that's his entire personality is just saying that word, and so he says it and it means the grooming standard is stupid and lame, and then he says it again to Sixta's horrible fucking

Cotton Hill face and this time it means the other thing, that the grooming standard is awesome, and Sixta yells about how he "wants to see clean party smiles before we step off" and they all just kind of wait for him to shut up and go away, then burst into laughter. I admire their composure. He makes me feel like the possibility of laughter is no longer within the A-O: only rage. Rage and gay jokes.

Brad comes back to the Humvee and they have a really long talk about shitting, shitting consistency, shitting experiences that they have had, all the cock that's been stuffed up Ray's little bitch asshole, et cetera. Espera notes, as though he has invented the wheel -- or I guess fire -- that the Marines are kind of homoerotic. Just a tad, Poke. "It's all we talk about. You ever realize how homoerotic this whole thing is?"

Rather than staring into that abyss with him, they all ... go back to being whatever the opposite of homoerotic is, and Gunny Wynn comes looking for Iceman, since Brad never called Nate back due to Ray having ADD and Captain America being a douchetard. "Oh shit, homes. I forgot to tell you, he was on the radio for you." Brad shoots daggers at Ray, causing a bunch of apologies, and then takes off.

Wynn makes small talk with Garza about life in the turret, standing all day. "I'm Mexican. Too hard to feel nothing from that. I got retard strength." Now that's strong! Wynn tells them they're going to 25% watch for the night, so three people on each vehicle get to snatch some z's. "Sleep?" whines Trombley. "What kind of fucked-up war is this?" Trombley makes me tired. Go to sleep, little fella. He looks just like an angel when he sleeps. Deadly little white trash sharpshooting psychopathic angel.

Nate and Brad watch the planes fly over and Nate worries: the casevac has been going back and forth all night. "Sir, the fucking Army declared Nasiriyah secured," Brad says. "It was on the net." Nate points out that the constant explosions and artillery would suggest that the Army is mistaken.

"Hey, reporter!" Evan and Ray are lying on the ground, and Ray tells him to flip over and make sure his cock's touching the ground when the tank goes by: "It feels fucking great! Come on, do it!" Evan thinks about it, and then rolls over just as the tank comes closer. It seems to do the trick. It's nice having friends, like, the kind of friends you can roll over and have tank sex with the ground in front of and they don't even think it's weird. Hell, they'll join in. That's the kind of friendship that lasts.

Next morning, Espera's digging latrine holes or something, maybe makeshift landfills, while Ray takes a dump in somebody's front yard. The lady's just kind of standing there watching him while he sings more Avril Lavigne and shits in her yard and screams for Rudy to come wipe his ass for him, because he forgot his baby wipes. "Use your hand, you nasty thing!" Rudy yells like some kind of antebellum ladies' maid, and Ray screams, hilariously, "Come here and wipe my ass, you heartless fuck." Espera complains to Lilley that in Afghanistan, "We didn't leave a speck of Americana behind." The whole time Ray is screaming Rudy's name over and

over and over, for no reason, offscreen. It's awesome. Ray is so perfectly cool in this episode. "Bro, could you imagine if hajjis invaded our country and started shitting in people's suburban yards?" Espera looks at Lilley, which you could do all day frankly, and says he can't actually imagine that. I sort of can, and it seems hilarious to me.

Ray finally pulls his pants up while the lady just keeps staring -- I mean, what do you do? -- and heads over to make small talk with a team from Alpha Company nearby. "You guys in Alpha getting some?" Lilley laughs and videotapes their conversation, which is all about how Bravo Company is dicksmokers, et cetera, and then Ray grabs one of their diaries away and starts reading. I hope we come back to this part, because the actually important part of this scene hasn't hit yet. "Leading men into battle is my calling... Since I was young, I felt drawn to the warrior society." That's a little gay, Ray notes. "Our minions are rolling... The people here live like rats. Hopefully what we are doing will lead them to a better life." Cody finally gets his diary back from Ray; Lilley videotapes them all. "Your calling wasn't to be a warrior, man," Ray laughs, "It was to be a fucking retard."

Team Two and Gunny Wynn listen to the BBC talking about an Army supply unit that were ambushed outside Nasiriyah, and how inside the town there have been heavy Marine casualties. And since First Recon can't be there, they're going to do the next-best thing: bitch and moan. Pappy relates a rumor about the Iraqis fake-surrendering, and Wynn just wants to know about the Marine casualties, and quietly says one of his weird sayings ("Never pet a burning dog") that he says from time to time. The weird sayings are the main thing that makes his whole relationship with Rudy make sense, to me. Doc Bryan -- always angry, never wrong -- is angry to have his thumb up his ass while Marines are dying a few kliks up the road. Nate strides up yelling and everybody scrambles back into position, then he tells Brad what's now going on.

"We've got orders to bust north to Nasiriyah, support the regimental combat team there. And there's been a change in the ROE. Anyone with a weapon is declared hostile. If a woman walks away from you with a weapon on her back, shoot her. If an armed Iraqi sells Good Humor out of the back of a VW, shoot him. I don't care if you hit him with a 40mm grenade." Everybody gears up, and Doc Bryan starts going down the line, checking everybody out. He shakes Trombley to get his flak vest closed, then bitches at him to get his tourniquet out of his pocket and tied where it's accessible, etc., momming him to death. Awesome. I like him so, so much. He finally lets Trombley go, and moves on to Evan, who's wearing a bullet-proof vest he got off eBay. Christopher helps him get the vest secure -- and no, even having them in the same scene doesn't make it any easier to tell them apart -- and Bryan's easy way with everybody, from Chaffin to Fick, impresses everybody.

"And this lunatic doesn't even know he's in Iraq," Doc says, pointing to Rudy. "Thinks he's a superhero from some Japanese comic." Rudy thinks of the gayest thing he ever said or did, then breaks his best personal record: "I put on my superhero uniform every day I'm in the Corps, brother. Hoo-rah?" Somebody tosses him a pity hoo-rah and Rudy mumbles about them finding their true dharma, and everybody's

getting ready to go while Evan watches, and there's some racist talk, but it's just kind of comforting.

The Bravo trucks come through a weird contingent of screaming dudes that I'm not sure about -- "Here comes the Marines, motherfuckers, look out!" -- and Trombley bitches about the POGs (pronounced so as to rhyme with the phrase, "Shane MacGowan's colossally fucked-up teeth," with a facial expression to match) so then Evan finally asks what POGs are: "Persons Other than Grunts. Rear echelon guys... Pussies." He's 19, folks. Nate radios his platoon that they're finally departing "friendly lines" and puts them on condition one.

Charlie Company radios in a report that only comes through about halfway; they're taking arms fire at something something east. Alpha Company is also in the mix. And what's Bravo doing? Rolling slowly toward the city. They finally get to the wreckage of the Army supply company that got destroyed, and the devastation is pretty intense: lots of blood and exploded American-looking things. Encino Man radios Godfather to ask if he wants Bravo to come help Alpha, but Godfather tells them to stay back from the river and "take an overwatch position." Bravo Company will basically be standing around, unless there are casevacs, and then they'll provide cover, I think, is the plan.

Brad watches Patterson through binoculars as Alpha engages the enemy, then watches the city explosions and artillery fire. It's like a storm moving toward you: getting closer, and closer, and then boom: it becomes real. There's a very subtle theme throughout this episode having to do with eyesight, with scopes and looking at the same things in the same way in the same light or through the same technology, how your circumstances can completely change what you see and how you see it. Like, we at home have the luxury of watching this show, or not, and have completely lost control over the images of the war itself because the fourth estate has been so compromised by the culture of fear that serves this war, so we don't really have the option of choosing what we see and what we don't -- to the degree that these guys do -- because there's nothing for us to see. At least in Viet Nam they showed the bodies on TV. Anyway. Ray whines about Alpha getting some, but Brad's still being Iceman: "They have their mission, we have ours."

Fucking Sixta walks through the A-O with a giant shit-eating grin on his face, as bombs and mortars and artillery and all kinds of other words for things that go bang are going off all around him. It's like a music video about the world ending, and he's giving some kind of bullshitty yee-haw napalm in the AM thing about how he "loves this shit" and "we're in the middle of it now boys" and he yells at Garza to get down off the truck, blah blah, dick-swinging as usual, and off-screen somebody says between explosions, "Fuck this shit, for sure."

Brad asks Nate, hunkered down by a truck, how long they have to sit in the middle of the open air, "with our nuts out, getting shot at," before RCT-1 actually goes into the town. Nate gives his usual deadpan: "Brad, we sit here with our nuts exposed. But when RCT-1 assaults over the bridge and we go in behind to get their casualties, we get our nuts blown completely off." Nearby, Evan's pretty jumpy because

everything is exploding all over the fucking place. Brad suggests they dig in, and Nate tosses his junk into a vehicle and heads to Espera just as some RCT-1 grunts take friendly fire. Doc Bryan comes running up, summoned by the casualties, and doesn't get two words out before Nate okays him to go help. He goes about fixing everything in his usual calm, angry, kind way.

Patterson (the Nate of Alpha) spots some RPG guys and asks Godfather if he can shoot them -- even though they're not visibly armed, they're spotting for the grenade launcher. Godfather relays the request up to Division and gets the ROE change approved. "You are approved to destroy unarmed targets suspected as spotters. How copy?" Patterson tells his team to start killing the spotters whether or not they're armed, and one of his guys taps a shooter on the shoulder and then darts out into the melee to start. That part was pretty crazy.

The young Battalion guy that's always with Godfather alerts him to General Mattis, who's bitching out the RCT-1 Colonel, Dowdy, up on the road. "The question is why the fuck am I standing here looking at a fucking bridge that doesn't have my Marines rolling across it," he's saying, and Dowdy is trying to explain the mission, but Mattis just yells at him. "Not only 'No,' Colonel, but 'Fuck No,' okay? I don't give a rat's ass about the resistance in the city. Your mission is to punch through the city, put RCT-1 north of it where our objectives are. This is just a fucking sideshow. You had 7,000 Marine riflemen who have been ready to go since for the past 24 hours, and you're standing here with your foot on your dick." He amends to say that it's actually his General dick with Dowdy's foot on it. Godfather comes running up to kiss some ass and Mattis tells him to hold the Battalion back for a bit. "When Colonel Dowdy here sees fit to unfuck himself and push through this fucking shithole, I'll turn First Recon loose." He turns to leave, and Godfather gruffs quietly, "That'd be my Alpha Company taking out their spotters. I'd expect this mortar fire to stop shortly, sir." Thanks for that, Patterson. Dowdy's sad because he didn't bring the General any similar treats, and everybody leaves Godfather all alone, staring at nothing.

Brad's sitting near the tall grass when he spots a confused Marine wandering: he looks one way and stumbles a few paces, then turns around and starts off in another direction. It's wrong and weird and he's concerned. "How's it going?" The guy looks at him but doesn't quite focus. "They shot one of my Marines in the stomach. Out there. We returned fire. Blew a donkey's head off. We didn't see ... much else." The guy keeps up his weird to-and-fro wandering, and Brad calls out to him again. "Buddy, do you need anything? Food, water..." The guy just stares past him, at something awful. "It's all good, Bro." He wanders away. Evan talks in the book about a certain look that Brad sometimes gets, this helpless and wounded look when he can't make the pieces fit. When the world can't quite manage to work itself out the way his methodical brain says it should, and it hurts him. Skarsgård nails it.

Command meeting with Godfather: "Expect a fight. Expect casualties when we push through Nasiriyah. Taskforce Tarawa's been in that city for 36 hours getting chopped up pretty good while we sit here with the Regimental Combat Team, nursing our

thumbs with our assholes." He is impressed with himself, for a second. Sixta is very serious, even though Godfather's not really saying anything. Sixta wouldn't know the difference. "Gentlemen, what does Ferrando think? We have allowed the enemy to dictate the tempo of our movements. If it were up to Ferrando we would not have stopped at the bridge this afternoon. We'd be through that city. But the good news is once we clear the Euphrates... General Mattis informs me that we are going to be in the game, gentlemen. And when we play, we -- not the enemy -- are going to dictate the tempo. Once we're over the river, we're going to detach from the RCT, push north and flank or destroy anyone who tries to stop us."

He dismisses them, and Encino Man (Bravo) approaches Patterson (Alpha). "He didn't say anything about the grooming standard. Is he giving us a pass on our men not shaving?" Horrified, Patterson clicks into the patented Nate Fick thousand-yard-stare of not slapping this idiot upside the head. "I'd interpret what he said to mean facial hair is not going to be our focus for the next 24 hours." Encino Man nods and runs off; Patterson stares after him. This cannot be all there is to war.

Time for a speech! Espera lies under the truck with Evan, sharing a cigarette and some thoughts. "Fifty percent of Americans are obese. You know what obese means, right? Fat as a motherfucker. All these other countries, nobody's fat. Think about that shit, Dog. How does a motherfucker get fat?" (This speech was even better in the book; the line is something like *Do you know how hard it is to get that fat?*) "You gotta sit on a couch, do nothing but eat and watch TV all day. White trash, poor Mexicans and blacks... All obese as motherfuckers. The white man has created a system with so much excess that even poor motherfuckers are fat. A few years ago, Dog, I refused a diploma from my community college... I didn't want no piece of paper from the white master saying I was qualified for his world. Then I joined the corps. Figured you can't beat 'em, join 'em. See, that's what this is all about, Dog. The US should just go into all these fucked-up countries, Iraq, Africa, set up American government and infrastructure. McDonald's, Starbucks, MTV. And then just hand it all over. How else are we going to make these hungry motherfuckers want to stop killing everybody? Put a McDonald's on every fucking corner. If we've got to blow up the corner, then build the McDonald's? So be it." Poke got forced out of the Battalion when the original *RS* articles were published. Doesn't mean he's wrong.

Brad comes up to nab Espera for a meeting with Nate and tells him to quit with the white man's oppression for five seconds. "I was just elucidating on the white man's *burden*, Dog." It's helpful, isn't it, to have an actual mouthpiece character in the source material. All these speeches, I can't vouch for all of them, but a lot of them are verbatim. Poke is so awesome. He waves Evan out from under the truck and catches a look from Brad. "What? Just wanted to get one last cigarette before we all die."

The Platoon's team leaders are standing around talking about the latest from that Army hit. Pappy's talking about how they had eleven soldiers captured: "Showed them on Arab TV. Abusing them on TV." Christopher (I think) is pretty upset. "Shit, they raped the one woman soldier. They broke her bones and then raped her." Brad,

approaching, reminds them that in "this neck of desert," it's not just the women that get raped. "In your dreams, Brad," says Espera, and Nate starts the meeting. "As we learned today from the eight hours we spent getting our asses shot at by the Euphrates, the enemy's got some fight in him. I have no word on our mission, but I assume we're going into Nasiriyah. Those are all casevac birds. Word is that Taskforce Tarawa's taken 200 casualties in that city." Pappy asks when they go in, and Nate tells him about Godfather's meeting with the Company commanders above. Wynn tells the team leaders to get their teams some sleep while they can.

"LT, what's the skinny on who we're fighting in the city?" asks Espera, and Nate says all he knows about are the black-pajama guys, the Fedayeen. "Guys in pajamas stopped two Marine regiments?" asks Espera. Yeah. These are the Baathist guys that are still loyal to Saddam. Talk about your ultimate "my CO is God" thing. Even without the training they're probably scarier than the actual Republican Guard. "You know Poke," Brad says, "Guys in black pajamas did all right in Vietnam too. You gotta respect the pajama." Wynn suggests that, what with all the nonstop artillery, they probably won't have too much trouble. Nate estimates the population at around 400,000, just as a huge explosion rocks the town. "Scratch a few off that number," Espera says easily. Nobody really says anything. Nate and Gunny Wynn take off for Battalion.

In the Humvee, Evan is scribbling while Trombley tries to think of names for his son. "James Alvarez Trombley" is met with a scalding "That's stupid" from Ray. Trombley's reply is excellent: "*You're* stupid!" Brad tells Gabe to switch turrets with Walt Hasser, Espera's gunner, because he's got more fifty cal experience. "I'm trading you for a Mexican," Espera shouts to Walt. "You're in Brad's truck now." As Gabe is getting down off the truck, Evan asks about a picture of his girlfriend that he showed Garza earlier. Gabe says he thinks Leon has it, and Brad chuckles. "You let these plebeians look at a photograph of your girlfriend?" Walt starts loading all his crap on top of Brad's Humvee, and Ray awesomely calls out to him without opening his eyes, "Hey, Walt, you keep it down? I'm having trouble hearing the artillery." Never have I gone from hate to love so fast with a person; I didn't even really like Ray in the book.

But this episode is all about that, because actually seeing Captain America and Encino Man doing the shit that they do, in living color, is kind of amazing. Like, this is Encino Man's brief to Nate: "We have to play the game harder. Godfather said that." Nate asks if, um, Godfather had any more specific orders, and Encino Man nods gravely. "Godfather told us the mustache-growing contest had nothing to do with building morale." Nate stares into space, because this is obviously going to be retarded. "Before the war began, Division G2 had covert asset intel that Iraqis planned to infiltrate our units. The mustaches were part of the General's plan to uncover enemy infiltrators." Captain America -- himself a mustache-wearer -- shits himself, because he already sees Iraqis where there are no Iraqis. "So if you see a Marine with a mustache from now on, he might be an Iraqi." Nate stares at nothing; every word offends his dignity more and more. "So no more mustaches. But the men don't have to shave tonight." And then he... walks away. Good meeting.

"Oh yeah," Encino Man says conversationally, as a tossed-off final thought. "Bravo's on point when we roll through Nasiriyah and then break from the main force." Before Nate can even recover from the mind-blowing douche chill that Encino Man inspires in his soul, Captain America gets in there all fussy and overbearing. "On point? In broken-down unarmored Humvees." He laughs bitterly. He's like that old woman in Accounting or whatever that thinks you are as deeply troubled by the situation with the coffee filters as she is. "They should change our name to First Suicide Battalion." He walks off muttering and laughing to himself about how he's the only one that actually understands what's going on here, and can you even believe that MEF doesn't see fit to follow his paranoid, stupid, inner-directed weird rules, and why won't anybody respect him, etc., and alone, Wynn stares at Nate, who's still kind of shell-shocked by the total assheadedness of those two goons. "We need to make sure the stupidity in this company doesn't roll down too hard on our guys," Wynn says. He has the most wonderful voice. There are so many good voices here, I guess after five years of speeches and stuff on *The Wire* it makes sense that you would cast for voices, but I could listen to Wynn and Doc talk all day long. Sixta, no.

Meanwhile, just "James Trombley" is met with more scorn from Cpl. Person. "Come on. Trombley, you should name your kid Jesus. I mean, your wife's Mexican. I mean, fucking Mexicans do it all the time. That's what's cool about knocking up a Mexican girl. She could drop a Jesus." Brad says sternly that nobody should ever have kids. "In fact, Trombley, you shouldn't ever have gotten married. Women will always cost, but marriage is the most expensive way to go. If you want to pay for it, go to Australia. For a hundred bucks you can order a whore over the phone. Half an hour later she arrives at your door... Fresh and hot, like a pizza." Trombley rolls over like a puppy for a belly rub because A) pussy and B) he likes being talked to like a man, plus C) pizza is good.

Nate knocks on the side of the Humvee and tells them that minor detail Encino Man remembered to share. "2000 hours Zulu time we go in. Hitman Two is leading the Battalion. Your vehicle is on point for all of us." YES! Brad nods, without squealing, and Nate tells them that once they cross the river it will get hairy. Brad checks his Blue Force Tracker and sees Taskforce Tarawa, Amtracs, a CAT team, and straight-leg grunt platoon. I would be lying if I said I know what those words mean, although Amtracs look like something Mobius would make a cartoon about. Nate tells him they bunching up and need to double-check all targets to make sure they're not friendly. Ray asks what time 2000 Zulu actually is, locally speaking, and it's 11 PM. "It'll be dark. To our advantage." Brad notes that this would very well be true, if Casey Kasem weren't hoarding all the batteries and fucking up his entire job, resulting in night blindness. "We turn everything on when we move," Nate says to calm him down, but Brad's still peevish. "I'm assured that we will be crossing that bridge before dawn," Nate says. "I'm assured of this." Four words Nate really needs to learn he shouldn't say.

Well after dawn, of course, they're finally rolling. Walt stares around at all the wreckage, worried, and down in the Humvee Ray is gobbling Ripped Fuel capsules

right out of the giant bottle. This is going to be awesome. "I thought they were gonna send us over the bridge in the darkness," Trombley says, and Ray shakes his head. "Nuh-uh. Not retarded enough." I kind of love Ray's outlook. Brad tells him to be careful with the speed and Ray becomes wonderful. "Fuck, man. I'm on 30 hours, no sleep. Beat the record I made in high school when I was on the debate team." He's amazing right now, like there's a light shining directly out of him made of amphetamines. Evan's like, "You were on the debate team?" Brad asks some kind of radio question because Ray is the Rain Man of the radio frequencies, and Ray manages to answer both questions in the same sentence, because he is high as shit. "Six, Four and TAD-Seven.

Yeah I was really fucking good but all the other guys on the team thought I was high all of the time." Brad absent-mindedly tells Ray to shut up, and they get ready.

They roll into town and it's fucking awful. Bodies, gunfire on all sides, more bodies, all kinds of bad guys, missiles being shot from helicopters into buildings that explode. Ray notices pink stuff on the road, and it becomes real. "Shit! Fucking tranny fluid from the Amtrac." The invincible Amtrac. "Jesus, Brad..." Trombley stares at the destruction all around them and feels a little less invincible his own self. He looks his age for a second. Brad tells Ray to watch the road, and it calms him down a bit; without even turning around, Brad says softly, "It's nothing, Trombley."

"Fucking Baptista," Ray says, as Team Three leader Baptista explodes into Portuguese on the radio. "I don't copy, Hitman Two Three. I don't copy a word you're saying," says Brad (Team One). "Every time Baptista gets excited, his English goes out the fucking window..." Ray continues to jabber. "And he's not even a citizen. He snuck in from whatever fucking greaseball country he's from and now he's a Marine? You know, there oughta at least be some sort of grammar test before you're out here blowin' shit up with heavy weapons." Without looking at him, Brad immediately responds. "If they did that, fucking bucktooth, cross-eyed, sister-fucking hicks like you wouldn't get in either." Needless to say, Ray loves this, and lights up like Christmas.

They continue through the town; Marines on foot are creeping along walls and then jumping right into close fire. Evan is now almost completely freaking out. Nate radios that both Assassin (Alpha) and Raptor (Charlie) are engaged behind them. "Fuck! All the bad guys are opening up on the guys behind us," whines Trombley. "Why aren't they shooting at us?" Back in Espera's truck, Lilley and Christopher are overjoyed to be seeing a huge building explode -- and taping it on Lilley's camera. "Yo, CNN would definitely pay for drama like that, Bro. That shit was extreme." Christopher goes "Woo!" and Espera shakes his head.

Encino Man tells them to halt just as they're rolling to a stop behind a bunch of other trucks in the middle of the city. Middle of the entire city. They're sighting snipers in the buildings around them, and the Third Platoon leader is like, "Interrogative. What are we doing here? Over." Ray points out that it's the perfect

place for an ambush, but Brad just sighs: "Orders." Nate radios to explain that Raptor is casevacing a Marine from the RCT, so they'll sit still for five minutes. Of course, Captain America freaks, conversationally going nuts on comms. "This is nuts halting us here. We're sitting ducks. This is the last place that we should be..." Ray admits that he is sick of Captain America spazzing out on comms, but I have to say I'm starting to enjoy it.

Kocher's team sits in their Humvee, listening. "They could be coming from all sides. *They could be coming from all sides!*" One of his team is like, "Um, is our Platoon commander okay?" Another guy starts to say that he can just fire their fifty-cal into the nothingness and imaginary guys that are constantly harassing Captain America, and it'll be fine... when AK fire opens up. Kocher thinks it's enemy contact for a second, but the gunner bitterly tells him that this particular AK firing for no reason belongs to their fucking Platoon commander. Kocher radios: "Interrogative. What are you engaging?"

Captain America doesn't answer, because he's too busy blowing an empty and unremarkable minivan to hell. His driver asks why he was shooting the car, and Captain America gruffs, "Denying the enemy transportation." It's weird, because *if* he were right, about anything, and not just a lunatic, this attitude wouldn't even really be that off-putting, but since he's a tool and seems to be in the grip of hysterical schizophrenia a lot of the time, it's just incredibly annoying. I'm always impressed when a writer -- or in this case, an actor and writers and a director -- manage to make someone so ball-bustingly obstructive and self-righteous and dangerous that you get mad just watching it. I love that trick. So anyway, his tone is completely pissy and fed up, on the radio: "How much longer are we going to be halted here, waiting to die in fucking Ambush Alley? My men really need to know. Out." Some moments later, Charlie Company finishes the casevac and stabilizes the guy, so the whole Battalion gets to start moving again.

Chaffin and Q-Tip -- the white supremacist and his best friend the wigger -- are sitting on the back of a Humvee, singing together, which is like their favorite thing. This time it's that trashy Drowning Pool song, made somehow even tackier: "Something's got to give, now let the hajjis hit the floor, let the hajjis hit the floor!"

Trombley stares out the window through his gunsight, sighting on nothing. "Sergeant, I didn't get to shoot." He looks through the gunsight and he doesn't see people. Ray's still all dosed up on amazingness. "That fucking sucks, Trombley. Your recruiting officer tell you you'd get to shoot people?" Fucking A, he did. "See, Trombley asked about shooting people. I asked about pussy. The guy told me I'd get to go to Thailand, get all kinds of strange. What'd you ask about, Brad? Brad probably saw that TV commercial. The one with the knight who fucks up the dragon then turns into the marine. Ooh, ooh! Dress blues with a sword! That fucking dress-blues commercial, man, that got so many fucking guys. Now look at us! Trombley hasn't killed anybody, I am half a world away from good Thai pussy and Colbert is out here rolling around Fuckbutt, Iraq, hunting for dragons in a MOPP suit that smells like four days of piss and ballsweat." Evan is impressed by this flourishing

wordplay, and of course Brad completely adores it, even though he doesn't indicate this in any way. "You should have rolled into battle with a sword, Brad. That would have fucking rocked." OMG it would have, too.

Nate tells the team leaders their new (for the moment) orders. Push north until they get to a cut-off, which he indicates on a map. "Gentlemen, our A-O is now Mesopotamia. The land between the Euphrates and the Tigris, cradle of civilization." Espera notes that the Marines riding head of them "sure civilized these motherfuckers." That was thanks to Second LAR, who came through alone last night, pushed through Nasiriyah, fighting off RPG teams the whole time with their Bushmasters. When kids draw weapons in their notebooks it's AKs and bayonets and the occasional tank, but when Marines daydream of awesome firepower and near-Transformers level awesomeness, it's the LAVs. They're insane-looking. Nate tells Espera not to get too starry-eyed about the LAVs because they won't be with them very long. Soon, they'll be completely on their own.

Brad approaches Baptista: "Shady. I wanted to apologize for blowing my stack on comms back there." Baptista admits that he was curious as to who pissed in Iceman's cornflakes, and Brad tries to be cool. "Shit, I'm not being critical of you, but sometimes when you get excited, you speak Spanish on the comm." Baptista says that *is* weird, because in Brazil -- "My country?" -- they speak Portuguese. Brad gets a huge laugh: "Yeah. Well, whatever language you people speak down there? Try to stick to English when we're on Marine Corps comms." He nods and winks at Brad, still laughing: "Si, Colbert, si."

Espera's still gushing about how he wants to take the 25mm Bushmaster to the Prom as Brad approaches. "Still railing on the white man?" Poke says he no longer hates the white man, because the Iraqis have cornered that market. "I'm just staying here in Iraq, eating my pound cake, playing on a white man's team." Brad looks at the destruction: these aren't the kind of Iraqis they've been dealing with until now, the kind that surrender and eventually turn around and walk back where they came from and then get brutally murdered by the cult of Saddam. "These guys came to fight." Espera points at one of them: dead, on the side of the road, covered in blood, with his gun still in his hand. "Motherfucker died trying to get a round off. Combat discipline."

Nate on radio, as though he was told the themes in this episode by a superior: "Observe everything, admire nothing." Ray drives and continues talking crazily. "Man, I am so high from not sleeping; so, check this out, maybe they didn't issue the wrong color fatigues for the invasion, maybe our blouses actually aren't green, maybe they are desert beige, you know, like sometimes colors actually start to look different when you're so sleep-deprived, like the sun, it looks red when it actually is yellow, you know, maybe our blouses aren't green, we're just so fucking sleep-deprived that's the way that they look to us..." Brad finally clicks into the fact that Ray's been talking for awhile, and shakes his head clear. "...Are you making this up?" Why, yes. "Fuck yeah, I'm making this up. It passes the time, brother."

Trombley points at a bombed-out truck, still smoking on the side of the road: "Get some! Look at that truck." Brad nods. "BM-21, a legit target." There's something sexual, or carnal, or ... No, it's sexual, Trombley moaning softly in the backseat: "Ahh. It's like a Halloween funhouse. Ha!" Bodies, on the side of the road, charred and ripped, body parts, men and women, ordinary cars exploded and bombed-out on the side of the road. Brad's not feeling it. "Stay frosty." He radios back to Espera after spotting a car with some dead guys in it: "Two One Bravo, two men in that car to our three. Do you see weapons?" Nope. They're still dead, though. They weren't armed, but they're dead. Maybe somebody thought they saw something else, maybe they saw a glint or a flash and thought the men were armed. And that's the best case scenario.

Evan stares out the window: by the side of the road, the body of a little girl. She has no legs. Sadly, Brad nearly whispers to him: "She's dead. Nothing we can do." Tyrannized and attacked, dominated by the image, Evan pulls out his camera. It makes total sense, actually: contain the genie, put it back in the bottle. Ray laughs grimly. "Well well well! Who's the sicko in our Humvee now? The psycho-ass jarheads, or the fucking liberal media just looking for a little exploitation?" Evan's ashamed.

Riding behind them, Lilley grins. "Bro, get that dude right there..." Christopher sights the little girl with Lilley's camera, dutifully: "It's not a dude." We're watching video of a video of a little girl, dead, with no legs. That's what we're doing right now. She becomes real. "Hey, Christopher, man, turn it off. Turn the camera off, Bro..." Espera snorts derisively. "So it's a snuff film now?" Lilley's ashamed. We're watching video of a video of a little girl, dead, with no legs. That's what we're doing right now.

Nate's looking through binoculars at something shiny. Maybe it's a weapon. Maybe he and Brad are seeing the same thing, in the same angle of the light, from the same place. "I'm seeing what you see." He nods. It's an enemy encampment. "You and Doc take Christeson and Stafford off my truck. They need some experience." Nate starts to radio in a report to Encino Man, as Brad's gathering his team -- to do recon, if you can imagine such a thing -- but Encino Man chirps back, irritatingly, on comms as he's walking up. "Hitman Two, this is Hitman actual on your six." Nate turns off the radio and stands to meet them.

"LAR taught these hajjis a lesson they won't forget," Casey Kasem smarms. Nate's not feeling it: bend the ROE too far and it'll break, and these two couldn't follow protocol if their lives -- or the lives of, say, hundreds of Marines -- depended on it, because they don't have the actual capacity to understand protocol. "Girl with the chopped off legs is sure gonna remember." Encino Man's weirded out by this sudden reference to something, to this thing you can look at through a gunsight or a camera, as though it were real. He's nearly offended, and a little sad somewhere in there. Casey Kasem's just self-righteous. "The hell is your problem?" Um, really? Okay. "Last night my best team could only maintain night optics at 50%. You are not

supplying us with the batteries we need." Casey Kasem gets very fucking harrumphy about it and Nate's like, "You've got more optics and thermals on that vest than I've got in the whole platoon. And I bet you've got the batteries to run them all night long..." Casey has the balls to be offended by this, and interrupts: "-- You're way out of line. These are for Bravo's *command*." Encino Man, trying his tragic best to be helpful, offers some helpful words of encouragement. "The men need to conserve resources. The Marine Corps teaches that." See what I mean? He's so amazingly stupid that he becomes *totally awesome*, like that show *Bones*. He's like if you took that "M-O-O-N spells *moon*" guy from *The Stand* and gave him three whole Marine Platoons to play with.

Brad leads the guys into the encampment. I don't even know who he's with, because it's Christeson and Christopher and Doc Bryan, all of whom may well be the same person or have the same name, and I realize I'm not going to figure that out this week, but it's a Perfect Storm anyway. Q-Tip is recognizable by his intonations and inflections, although he does not say "screwby" at any point. Q-Tip hisses at Christeson, aka "PFC Fucknuts," to watch out for booby-traps. "Don't blaze a trail. Tread in Sergeant Colbert's footsteps." There are flies, and lots of dead bodies, and they creep and creep and creep around to no obvious purpose. At some point Christeson sees a bag of rice and decides to pull out his dick -- "Say hello to my little friend" -- and pee in it. Why? Nobody knows. "Denying the enemy." Christopher or Doc Bryan is grossed out, and forgets Nate's last warning about observing without admiring. "These men living here on rice and beans, sleeping out here in the cold on these rags, these are some fucking hard men. You ladies bitch if you get a MRE without a fucking Pop Tart."

The sound of twigs snapping gets everybody's back up, and they take aim at somebody approaching over a low hill. After a few tense moments, the person clears the berm waving a big piece of cloth. It's a flag. It's Captain America, blundering through an enemy encampment, waving colors. "Republican Guard insignia," he booms in his dorky dumb voice. "Special Saddam division." Christopher quietly asks if he should shoot him, but Brad tells him not to waste the bullet. He gets that melty helpless look again; so does Doc Bryan. Maybe it's catching. Maybe that's just what Captain America does.

Later on, everybody's back in the MOPP suits, rolling, as Nate tells the Platoon that the report they got of an enemy gas attack was "again" in error. Heh. "All Hitman teams return to MOPP-2 posture. Over." They all start to strip off their MOPP suits, again. Back behind, Espera's leading his team in a rousing rendition of that Dynamite Hack cover of "Boyz In Tha Hood" that was in *Office Space*. "This is plain undignified," Brad complains about the stupid suits, and Ray holds up one glove. "Hello, everyone. I'm Michael Jackson," he says, in a creepy high voice. Evan, who has sort of had it with the MOPP suits already, notifies the team that this is "fucking miserable," and Ray points out that, on the upside, "we get to invade a whole fucking country." Brad wishes aloud that Saddam *would* gas them, just to make the MOPP suit bullshit worthwhile. Evan stupidly notes that evidence of biological weaponry would justify, ya know, *the invasion*, too. You're talking to the five guys

on this planet who actually don't have to ask that or pretend that they're entitled to governmental transparency or any of the rest of the soft NPR complaints that make no difference in reality beyond making us feel good about our own ability to be indignant. You know who literally does not require iota one of justification for military action? *The military*. You're soaking in it.

"Oh, there's no doubt Saddam's got chemicals," Ray says. "It's just you liberal dicksucks who try to pick everything apart." Evan's face suggests that between the sudden rancor, the heat, the dead bodies of little girls, and the irritating MOPP suit issues, he would maybe like to go home a bit early from summer camp. Brad spots and sights something with his monster BFG. I don't know the word for it, I guess it's a grenade launcher or something, but it's huge and kind of gorgeous. "Foot-mobiles, two o'clock." Evan tries to understand what's going on behind them: apparently Bravo Three is taking fire from a gas station they passed. Brad tells Ray to slow down, while he figures out what he's looking at. "Is that an RPG tube? Hitman Two, this is Two One. We got two foot-mobiles on our two o'clock, 900 meters out, in black. They appear to be carrying an RPG tube. How copy?" Evan gets into a huge fight with his MOPP suit but eventually he is victorious.

Up on top, Walt confirms the guys, and Nate tells them to stop, then radios to Encino Man, who okays the engagement. Brad gets out and sees scopes, if not an PRG tube; Nate drops beside him. Elsewhere, Charlie Company is also engaging; possibly the same gas station. Nate sends Pappy and Rudy out with an M40 to deal with the bad guys that are watching them. "Hitman, this is Hitman Two. Be advised enemy foot-mobiles to our east have optics on us and appear to be armed with an RPG tube." Encino Man approves Nate to engage them, and Nate relays the order. On comms, Rudy's callsign would be Echo Five Romeo. That's nice. If I had a fish or like a dog or something I would definitely consider naming it that.

Rudy and Pappy lie down on a berm and do some complicated M40 stuff that eventually will result in a puffy cloud of blood or two. "Range to target, niner seven niner. Wind moving from west to east, quarter value. On scope. Nam Myoho Renge Kyo Nam Myoho Renge Kyo Nam Myoho Renge Kyo..." This last, "I devote my life to the Wonderful Law of the Buddha's Lotus Flower teaching," is not as far as I know a military code for anything, but Rudy has kind of invented for himself the way the world works, too. They take the first guy out in the head, and the second guy crawls, and Rudy spots him, and Pappy hits him in the chest. So that's two dead dudes. Rudy pats Pappy sweetly on the back.

"Men from that camp we found," Brad rumbles behind them; Nate nods and they get up, just as Charlie Company is finishing up their mess too. Manimal bumps Rudy's fist when they return to the Humvee, and Chaffin asks Rudy what it felt like, "to kill." Rudy shakes his head. "I don't know, Dog. Felt fucking good, I guess... I try to live my life by the Tao, bro. I can't always make my own dharma." Chaffin nods sagely. "I hate them filthy hajji fucks." Rudy grins, kind of amazed. "That's what I love about you, Dog. You're so fucking messed up."

Captain America takes aim at a random fleeing guy and kills him. He's unarmed. Kocher's buddy asks him if he saw that happen, and Kocher shakes his head. "We didn't see what the Captain saw. He's our commander." Two separate thoughts. As far apart as two thoughts can be.

Brad shows Ray the Battalion's new path, all alone: "Just First Recon. This has the makings of a legit fucking mission. We're screening, doing a route reconnaissance. Maybe movement to contact. We got fifteen kliks on our own. Gonna link up with RCT-1 outside the next shithole town. We got no air, there's a shamal storm coming. Rotary isn't flying." Ray points out that another way to say this is, "Bait for the bad guys." Brad nods happily. "Yep, but we'll be the first Americans to roll down this road." Oh, empire. You are a whore, aren't you? Evan gets more weirded out as they drive by bodies, bodies, bodies. Brad smells an opened box of Charms and barks without turning around. Trombley and Evan quickly, shamefaced and a little afraid, spit them out. "Sorry, Sergeant. I had one left. Hey, you know what sucks? All those dead bodies we seen today, and I didn't get to shoot any of them." Evan is sympathetic.

Ray spots more foot-mobiles, and then realizes they're young women. He takes off his helmet while cursing excitedly, and puts on his ridiculous sunglasses. Brad's eating it up. "Brad! They're fucking hotties! I didn't know hajjis could be hotties. I thought they were all camel-faced hags!" He honks and calls out to them toolishly, wagging his tail and talking about his nonexistent rock star past. A man holds up a baby and all the people are all, "We love you, Americans. We love you! I love you Americans!" Brad thanks them, and reminds them to vote Republican.

Nate radios Brad, with a hitch in his voice, to cross a bridge that makes no sense. Brad checks the map and asks if he's sure -- that's not the right turn. Nate's voice says it all: "Direct order from Hitman Actual. He's going off of his map." Brad nods, disgusted. Of course, Encino Man is now reading maps. "They let him have a map?" Ray asks.

Eventually there's a full halt; Ray and Espera are asking what the deal is, but Brad's too busy staring out at a sea of grass and no more road: "Motherfuck." Encino Man radios to ask why they've halted, and Ray informs him that they're run out of road. Encino Man stares for a while, and Brad watches him fuss around. "Just figuring out we're lost..." Nate says, and Brad coughs. "I could have told him that a half an hour ago. The whole Battalion's two kliks east of us on the other side of the Gharraf canal. We are now to the rear of everybody." Nate shakes his head. "He's our commander, Brad." He doesn't see what we see. Encino Man randomly stares and does arcane movements for awhile, then hits the radio. "Hitman Two, this is Hitman Actual. We're gonna backtrack. Hitman Three will be on point. Colbert's team took a wrong turn at the bridge..." Brad opens his comms, face deadly, but Nate catches his eye and shakes his head, sympathetically. Wouldn't help.

Bravo Two stops to question some fleeing, unarmed civilians on their way back to rejoining the Battalion. "Villagers say they are grateful to be liberated by the Americans and look forward to working hand-in-hand..." Meesh says, as usual, and

Doc Bryan cuts him dead: "You're lying, Meesh, and they fucking know it." One of the guys, talking excitedly, draws a finger across his throat. It's evocative. "Meesh," Nate says authoritatively, "Cut whatever bullshit the higher-ups have told you to say." Doc has, of course, had it. "We're all alone out here, Meesh. You fuck us, I'll smile killing you." Meesh, chillingly, admits that they told him to spin this stuff -- "a little psy-ops" -- but says they're right. "We're in this together. These dudes are saying there are some bad dudes up ahead. They know we're coming, and they want to hit us. And they hate America, man. I say we call in some air, some Cobras, fuck them up." Nate reminds him about the shamals on their way, the lack of air support, and Meesh is stupid and shitty some more so they walk off.

"Where did we get the so-called interpreter?" asks Doc, possibly not for the first time. Nate says Meesh told him that he works directly for General Mattis, Evan says Meesh claims to work for the CIA, and Brad says that back at Camp Mathilda, "He told me he could hook me up with free satellite TV."

Young Battalion guy radios to say that -- though he can't locate Encino Man -- they need to know that Alpha and Charlie are taking heavy fire from the town. Nate reminds everybody to be cool and tells Brad what's going on. "Looks like another Nasiriyah." Battalion command says they're going to find a way around the town, to link back up with RCT-1, and Nate agrees. Everybody splits to hold the position until Battalion figures it out. PS they will never figure it out.

Ray puts his helmet back on as Evan climbs back in; Brad talks to them through the window. "Gentlemen, we're looking at a pretty short ride. We're gonna link up with the Regimental Combat Team, after which we rack out tonight." Trombley is of course heartbroken that they're not riding through the town. "But I didn't get to shoot yet." Ray points out that the town managed to stop an entire regiment, "with like tanks and shit," but Trombley's not having it. His lip starts to tremble. "But I didn't even get one..." Brad tries again to explain the whole thing about dying, but can't get traction: "-- Trombley. If we went through that town, we'd get smoked." Trombley does not give a fuck about your logic, and you can shove your Orange Mocha Frappucino: he wants to shoot a gun. They gave him a gun, and he's really good at using it -- it's his thing, the thing he's good at -- and now the whole world seems to be conspiring, so as to keep him from using it. It hurts his feelings.

Godfather is overjoyed by Alpha Company's performance -- "a danger-close fire mission... good effect on target" -- and radios in to tell them so. Unfortunately, it gets his blood up so high that he decides that "Ferrando doesn't give a fuck what they call it" and they're going to push through the town after all. "Do we have a sitrep on enemy forces inside this town?" Um, other than how they managed to stop Col. Dowdy and seven thousand RCT Marines? "Yeah. Enough to stop Colonel Dowdy. But personally, Godfather doesn't like being told what to do by the enemy. I don't like the fact that the enemy had me sitting in this shithole for the past couple hours." Young Battalion guy stares at Sixta, who is grinning like he just fucked a farm animal. "I might choose a different hole, somewhere else. I plan to find that hole by going through that town up ahead. If there's one thing I learned these past

days in Iraq, there's no shortage of shitholes. More shitholes in this country than oil wells." He radios to Patterson and decides that given how Alpha "did a shit-hot job calling in those danger-close fires ... just like you were shit-hot taking out those forward observers by the Nasiriyah bridge... I want Assassin on point when we push through that town. How copy?" Patterson's surprised, firstly because apparently Godfather actually is capable of using the singular first-person pronoun we all love so much, and secondly because they just figured out the route around the town. No dice. "I want you to step off in five mikes. Push through that town. How copy?" Patterson's like, "Fucking honored. Dying for no reason at all should be really cool and interesting."

"Three hundred thousand dollars, Trombley. That's the cost to raise your average middle-class white kid. Maybe since your fiancee's Mexican and you'll have little half-Mexican babies, you can cut corners. Do it on the cheap. I bet Sergeant Espera's parents didn't spend more than a hundred to raise him, but of course, look how he turned out." Trombley, not about to yell back which is what he should do, asks instead of Brad's got a problem with marriage. Does he ever.

"My sweetheart since junior high. Left me, and married my best friend since junior high. We're all still friends. They're one of those happy couples that likes to take pictures of themselves and hang 'em up all over their goddamn house. Sometimes I go over there just to look at my ex-fiancée doing all the things I used to do with her, with my best friend. Surfing, and jet skiing... It's nice having friends." He smiles brightly at Ray, who hasn't taken his eyes off Brad yet. Ray looks away.

It's sad, and maybe a little bitter, but the scariest thing is the impression that he's not entirely being sarcastic. I mean, we know him at Camp Mathilda and here in the field, he's awesome, kind, takes care of people without even thinking twice. He's smart, honorable, knows who to trust, knows how far to push and which way, takes care of his men, is good at the business of war. But Iceman's also an adult who was once a young person who drew tanks in the corners of his notebooks. He's a little weird. We know him as a hero, or what heroes look like right now, but at home... I can't shake the image of him showing up at their house, after a tour, and he's just ... this broken guy, who didn't really engage too much in his one chance at falling in love and being normal, and watched everything slip by. And you're all growing into adults together and it's just like, "Well, that's Brad. He's on the couch sleeping right now, it's a long story. We try and make sure he ... eats." The Corps was everything and there's a time when the Corps *should* be everything, but I don't think forever is an appropriate amount of time. I love Iceman, at least the Evan version of Brad: all the weird edges and traps and everything, all of it, because he's on my team. But I would definitely put him in the category of people who maybe can't retroactively adapt entirely back to normal, which makes me love him a whole lot more. Like if they gave some Marines ... gills. To breathe underwater or something, in the future. Future war. Maybe some of those guys can't change back, and they have to stay down there. All alone, still dangerous and strong, where it's quiet and it's dark. And maybe that's Brad.

Anyway, that was the biggest thing in the whole book, for me, so I'm kind of glad we got past it early. Nate interrupts while Evan's heart is pretty much breaking on the weirdness of Brad, and relates their new orders. "We're going through the town. Alpha's already rolling. We're picking up the rear. It's just us. There's no air because of a shamal moving in. We're the last element to roll through. Nobody stops, nobody gets cut off." He looks at Brad fiercely. "I'm glad you're my team leader."

Bravo comes rolling down the street, the guys singing "Hot In Herre"; Ray and Brad needle each other, nervously. Brad kisses a grenade and loads it, blowing Evan's entire mind. "Gentlemen, from now on we're gonna have to earn our stories." They all get their game faces on; that's the Iceman cometh, right there. The town is quiet, and disgusting. Electric wires hang, hand-cut. The winds are starting, blowing dust through the town. Donkeys scatter. "Hitman Two says Alpha cleared this town under heavy fire," Espera reports. "No casualties were reported." There are eyes everywhere. "Bro, why aren't they shooting at us?" asks Lilley. Up ahead there's a building like a church, like a cathedral. Brad sees the glint and the movement, and then they're shooting, from every window.

"Contact! Run," shouts Brad, and they move faster. "Here we go, boys," laughs Pappy -- the nicest, most normal/cold-eyed deadliest killer in the Battalion. Chaffin laughs at Christopher: "Happy birthday, bitch. Try not to get shot in the face!" There are bodies and gunshots coming from every place, on the ground, on foot, in the buildings, jumping out at random and shooting. Evan helps Brad reload his BFG and he blows up a car. They drive through town slowly, like an arcade game, heads popping up at random like moles. It's just like a video game. Things get fast and confusing as they roll. Manimal stands in his turret and takes down the entire cathedral. Evan nearly weeps. Trombley sights, and shoots. The guy falls off a roof, all the way to the ground. "I got one," says Trombley in a hushed voice, like he's about to double-check his lottery numbers. "*I got one!* I saw his knee explode!" His joy is palpable.

Up top, Walt's gun malfunctions just long enough to distract him from the cables that clothesline him, trapping him against the Humvee roof by his neck. Ray backs it up as quickly as possible, Walt gets free, and everybody screams at once: "Go, go, go!" Evan loudest of all. As they leave town, Nate calls for a radio check, and one by one they check in: "This is Two One Alpha, up 120 and up... Two One Bravo is up 700 and up... Hitman Two, this is Two Two, up 200 and up... This is Hitman Two Three, up 300 and up..." Evan stares, in the sudden silence; Trombley's predictably postcoital but not in a particularly humorous way; Brad stares out the window and Ray nearly bounces in his seat. "We got fucking lit up," Brad says quietly, and they all start laughing and shouting. "Man! Everybody is okay, right?" Evan's voice is a little shaky; Trombley still can't believe he got one. Softer now: "You all right?" Evan nods, and whistles, a long slow whistle that says it best. Ray laughs hysterically.

On the other side all the trucks stop so the Marines can jump out and hug each other and scream and yell and run in little circles and have boners and whatever.

Ray and Walt chat about how Walt almost got his head scraped off. It's reported that Kocher's guy Darnold took a shot in the arm. Rudy climbs all over Evan like a gigantic puppy, or that tiger that hugged that lady that time, babbling like Ray: "Yo, did you see my man Manimal? Fucking wall of fire. Wall, wall, wall, wall! He brought that building down. He saved our asses!" Chaffin climbs onto Manimal's Humvee and humps the side of his head: "Yes, he did, he did!" Manimal shoves him off and tells him to quit. "This shit ain't funny. If it goes a little different, we could have all got killed today." Buzzkill denied. There's silence, and then everybody laughs at him. In the foreground, Pappy and Espera agree that this was the burning dog, and they pet it for sure, and whatever inauthentic moment. Sometimes Jon Huertas plays to the audience in a way that really disagrees with me.

Sixta comes up to shit on everything in a singsong voice: "Grooooooming staaaaaaaandard! By first light tommory, I spects all y'all to be clean-shaven!" Wynn's like, "For real? Right now you're pulling this?" And Sixta gives what would be a believable rationale, if he weren't so obviously, scenery-chewing fucking useless: "There's a lots can go wrong outcha. Lack of battery, cold chow, lack of poosy, but the one thing these men can count on is the grooming standard. I believe it always ought to be there far 'em." Nate notes that Encino Man said just last night that they didn't have to shave; I say, why engage in this BS at all? "In his in-finite wisdom, the Battalion commander never said that. You'd best check with your Company commander," Sixta says, and breezes past like a total douche. "The one solid piece of information he passed and he was wrong." Nate and Gunny Wynn enjoy the bitter stupid irony.

The sunset through the netting, as Godfather addresses the command, is the exact color and quality of light that you get when you hear that *Deer Hunter* song. "Cavatina." It sets the stage for either an inspiring moment where Godfather will demonstrate at least a little bit of why he's the Battalion commander, or else ironically demonstrate how worthless he is, or he's a craven this and that, or he's wilier than we think, or he's stupid and blah blah. Instead, the speech does none of those things. He doesn't see what we see. He's our commander.

"Ferrando believes in the violence of action. The enemy, he stared us down in Nasiriyah. But I wanted to show him today that some Americans won't back down from a fight. I can put it in terms of tactics or strategy, I could quote Boyd. The simple way to say it is that some people might reasonably fear these Iraqis running around trying to organize ways to kill us. I don't. And not because I'm a particularly courageous individual. I simply have a bigger fear. In my darkest hours, I sometimes fear that I will do something General Mattis won't like. Gentlemen... I have no such fears tonight."

Young Battalion guy, fucking Sixta, everybody grins. Godfather sits in their awe like that was profound or something, but really it's just the same shit: if on the one hand you have the inevitability of death and the gaping horror that death should and will inspire, and on the other hand you have the complete lack of culpability that results

from following orders... Which one are you going to call your religion? They turn these guys into guns and show them how to put all that patriotic feeling and honor and duty and need to help everybody, how to put that up against the terrifying fact of futility: by letting go, and just letting the CO be God: by pretending that the grooming standard is more important as batteries for the NVGs. It's easier that way, for the person and also for the military force. It's not exactly leadership, but if everybody were doing it right, that wouldn't matter, and anyway the problem/solution here is more existential than anything else. If you're looking at the face of an Iraqi soldier with no qualms about dying horribly -- and with more righteous hate than the Corps could ever hope to inspire, and more pitbull rage than fat America would ever understand -- and the face of the General of 1 MEF: which one would you rather have setting the tempo?

Later it's nighttime. Ray wakes up Brad, or attempts to do so; he'll open one eye but not the other. "We have a mission. Search and rescue. One of the officers went out to take a shit, stepped over the berm and hasn't been heard from since." Brad rolls his one open eye. "An officer." Ray's tickled, as usual. "From H&S Company. He's probably just lost in the dark somewhere..." Brad stares at Ray for awhile, tired and uninterested in yet more bullshit, but eventually he stands up, and Ray and Brad climb up over the berm and into the dark together. "Fucking officers will be the death of us yet."